

WAKE UP, AND CHOOSE LIFE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Behold I have placed before you today life and good, and death and evil... and you shall choose life, in order that you and your descendants may live" [30:15,19]

Earlier, in our reading of Parshas Re'eh four weeks ago, we had a very similar verse: "Behold, I have placed before you today, blessing and curse." [Deut. 11:26] The Meshech Chochma, Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, inquires why the verses are different. Why is it that in Parshas Re'eh reference was made only to a choice between blessing and curse, while now the Torah makes the choice that much stronger by establishing it as a "matter of life and death?" What happened in the meantime?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochma, is Teshuvah. Teshuvah is often translated as "repentance," but it stems from the root "to return." It means to turn away from sin, and to return to G-d -- to abandon past evils and to chart a new path of good. Teshuvah goes beyond nature, allowing us to erase and even reverse the consequences of past actions. It is a great gift which HaShem our G-d has laid down before us.

Here, in Parshas Netzavim, the Torah tells us the mitzvah of Teshuvah. "And it will be that when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have placed before you, that you will call them to mind among the other nations where HaShem your G-d has banished you there. And you will return to HaShem your G-d, and you will listen to His voice... And HaShem your G-d will turn to you in your exile and have mercy upon you, and return and gather you in..." [30:1-2,3]

Once we have this fantastic promise, we must act upon it. The Sha'arei Teshuvah, the Gates of Return of Rabbeinu Yonah, speaks at length about the importance of turning away from sinful behavior immediately. A person knows he or she has done something evil for which he should be punished. He knows he has a way to escape the punishment, to cleanse his conscience and his soul. How could he fail to do so? This is like a person grabbed by the King's soldiers and thrown into jail, only to find the other prisoners digging a hole and escaping out of reach, knowing they cannot be caught -- and yet he just sits there. He is declaring that he does not fear the King or his punishment!

The Meshech Chochma and other commentators explain that failure to do Teshuvah is worse than the sin itself. In addition to all of the above, the person leaves himself or herself open to repeating the same behavior. And this, says the Meshech Chochma, explains the difference between the two verses.

In Parshas Re'eh the Torah discusses the path of good and evil. But here, in Parshas Netzavim, the

Torah adds in the Mitzvah of Teshuvah. G-d promises mercy. G-d asks the sinner to return. Should he fail to do so, this is worse than the sin itself. If the sin itself brought a curse, says the Meshech Chochma, then the failure to return brings "death." Therefore, he says, "and you shall choose life."

Note that the verse here does not say, "and you shall choose the blessing." According to the Meshech Chochma, this makes perfect sense -- because sometimes we don't! We all do things which we knew were wrong from the start. Rather, the Torah tells us to choose to return, by saying "and you shall choose _life_." Having made the error, we must turn away from the behavior!

This is a time of year when, we are told, Teshuvah is especially easy to do. And as a result, it is even more important to take advantage of the opportunity. Maimonides writes [Laws of Teshuvah 3:3]: "Every year, the sins of every individual are weighed against his merits on the Holiday of Rosh HaShanah. One who is found righteous is immediately sealed for life, and one who is found wicked is immediately sealed for death. And the one in the middle has a suspended judgement until Yom Kippur. Should he do Teshuvah, he is sealed for life, and if not, he is sealed for death."

Obviously this is not referring to physical life, for we see "the wicked prosper." But our spiritual survival depends upon taking advantage of the opportunity to cleanse our slates, to do Teshuvah, especially when it is so easy. Once again we see that Teshuvah is more powerful than a Mitzvah, and conversely failure to do Teshuva is worse than a sin, for the scales of judgement do not wait for the person to add more Mitzvos between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur -- only for him to do Teshuvah.

Everyone must regard himself or herself as "one in the middle," between evil and good. And we must take the opportunity. The Call of the Shofar should awaken us from our slumber. Maimonides writes in the following paragraph [3:4], "Although [the Mitzvah of] blowing the Shofar is decreed by the verse," meaning that we cannot necessarily understand the reason, nor is the Mitzvah dependent upon any reason we might devise, "there is a hint within it, as if to say, 'wake up, sleepers, from your slumber, awaken from your nap! Examine your actions, return in Teshuvah, and remember your Creator."

Let us take advantage of this wonderful gift called Teshuvah. This year, let us truly hear the Shofar!